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RE-STATING THE STATE: PARAMILITARY TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND POLITICAL ORDER IN COLOMBIA (1978-2004)

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Re-stating the State: paramilitary territorial control and political order in Colombia (1978-2004)

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“War has its own grammar”
(Clausewitz)

“We are children of the State”
(Henry de Jesús Pérez, paramilitary leader from Puerto Boyacá)

Introduction

This paper is devoted to the description of the paramilitary intent of establishing a distinct social order in a specific region of Colombia (Puerto Boyacá and its hinterland), and the way in which it coexisted and interacted with state structures. We want to understand how and why such structures and political order coevolve, and how such evolution was related to the type of provision of security offered by the State and other actors.¹

There are three key questions regarding these transformations that must be acknowledged. First, how and why does the privatisation of the provision of security take place in the midst of a civil conflict. Indeed, this is a meaningful theoretical question, with practical resonances as well, given the increasing privatisation of security, repression, and organised violence. Second, how does state building promoted by private agents relate to criminality? Once again, this is important both because it is an essential part of our understanding of the genealogy of the state,² and because in several parts of the world globalised illegal markets and the privatisation of the provision of security coexist and mingle in multiple ways.³ Third,

¹ The paper draws on several sources: 1) field work in Puerto Boyacá, La Dorada, and Puerto Triunfo (Barón, *Autodefensas De Puerto Boyacá: Origen, Crisis y Consolidación* 2004), in the south of the Magdalena Medio region that has suffered very strong paramilitary influence (Puerto Boyacá was the epicentre of one of the main paramilitary sprouts in the 1980s); 2) interviews with the paramilitary, their victims, state officials, and regional politicians; 3) judicial proceedings on paramilitary activities and crimes in the Magdalena Medio; 4) national and regional press databases; 5) governmental sources; 6) paramilitary output; 7) previous publications, especially Carlos Medina Gallego, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico. Origen, desarrollo y consolidación. El caso de Puerto Boyacá*, Bogotá: Documentos Periodísticos, 1990; and Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas, 1982-2003*, Bogotá: Iepri-Planeta, 2002. Any unreferenced quote comes from oral testimonies.

² Charles Tilly, ‘War making and state making as organized crime’, in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol(eds), *Bringing the state back in*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Mancur Olson, ‘Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development’, *The American Political Science Review*, 87:3 (1993), pp.567-576; Anthony Giddens, *The nation-state and violence*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; Barrington Moore, *Los orígenes sociales de la dictadura y la democracia. El señor y el campesino en la formación del mundo moderno*, Barcelona: Península, 2000 [1973].

³ Josiah Heyman (ed.), *States and illegal practices*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999.

how do violence and repression constitute social order?⁴ How are the type of force applied and of order built interrelated? Pure violence (and we will see that the Colombian paramilitary discovered this problem very quickly) is powerful but limited:

The power to hurt can be counted among the most impressive attributes of military force...It is measured in the suffering it can cause and the victims' motivation to avoid it...To inflict suffering gains nothing and saves nothing directly; it can only make people behave to avoid it. The only purpose, unless support or revenge, must be to influence somebody's behavior, to coerce his decision or choice.⁵

Indeed, the Colombian paramilitary appeared as a punitive force, basically of the cattle ranchers and the narcotraffickers, but they soon discovered the need to govern, which entailed establishing new mechanisms to control the population. Last but not least, how are social order and the dynamics of violence related?⁶ Are they related at all in Colombia? Certainly, many observers of the Colombian case would answer negatively. Neither the guerrilla nor the paramilitary, the standard argument goes, have been able to create the *we-them* divide that characterises so many civil wars; their support (for example in opinion polls) is feeble. In effect, Colombian war lords typically establish their control on reluctant and scared populations, that try to adapt and survive whatever the acronym of the illegal army that happens to dominate the scene. Are violence and terror in Colombia related in some way or another with class and social cleavages? And then how? How does this find expression in the various dimensions of stateness (especially administration and organisation)?

This paper will describe the evolution of Puerto Boyacá's paramilitarism from these three perspectives: privatisation of the provision of security, state transformations triggered by private organised coercion, links between organised violence and social conflicts, and the way these links are reflected in forms of governance.

Our point of departure is that it is impossible to explain Colombian paramilitarism without understanding how the state and the rural rich were challenged, and how they answered to such challenge. Both challenge and response gave origin to a *long* and *asymmetrical* war, that gave the paramilitary the opportunity to build systems of territorial control without defeating – or critically undermining – the main guerrilla, the FARC. In this process, the paramilitary changed, and at the same time transformed the state, in a sense clearly divergent from what is found in the genealogies of the state cited above: instead of evolving from roving to stationary bandits, paramilitarism went the other way round.

In the first part, we sketch the evolution of Colombian paramilitarism, focusing on the main tensions that have governed the evolution of the phenomenon. In the second part, we narrate the paramilitary war and territorial control in Puerto Boyacá and its hinterland. Here we establish a periodisation: how, why, and by whom it was founded; the results of its strategic decision to incorporate narcotraffickers as main partners; its breakdown, recomposition, and present form. In the third part, we analyse the empirical evidence with regard to the three key questions, and discuss how paramilitarism has transformed stateness, democracy, and governance in Colombia.

⁴ See in particular Tilly (1985) and Giddens (1987); but also Thomas Schelling, *Arms and influence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, and Elizabeth Wood, *Insurgent collective action in El Salvador*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁵ Schelling (1966), p.2. However, Schelling's analysis is incomplete, as this paper shows.

⁶ Moore (2000); Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, New York: Pantheon, 1981.

The Colombian paramilitary, their politics, and the State

The paramilitary appeared in Colombia in the early 1980s. There are three main differences between Colombian paramilitarism and other vigilante phenomena in Latin America and elsewhere. First, its relation with the State. Certainly, the Colombian paramilitary did not appear by chance; they are a product of the incumbent political order and are by no means 'external' to the political system. The main intra-systemic forces that have fed paramilitarism are the following:

1. *Governmental policies.* In a pioneer work, Romero claims that Colombian paramilitarism is essentially a rebellion of regional coalitions against pro-peace policies of the central government.⁷ Though an important aspect of paramilitarism this should not be overstated, since in many senses the paramilitary were promoted directly by decisions taken at the highest levels. There were previous laws that authorised the creation of 'self-defence' groups.⁸ The Turbay Ayala government (1978-1982) enacted an extremely repressive security statute, but at the same time called on the population to arm itself.⁹ From then on, practically all Colombian governments have shown weakness towards paramilitarism, and in general towards the privatisation of security. In several regions, army officers have created, promoted, and protected paramilitary units, many at times claiming credibly that they followed central government's directives;¹⁰ indeed, they have frequently enjoyed full impunity, sometimes even promotion.¹¹ "Paramilitaries did not combat the army and the police; they understood that it was technically and psychologically impossible to do so: "Self-defence groups cannot confront the authorities, by doing so they would loose their meaning".¹² Meanwhile the army and police only started to capture the paramilitary from 1995 on, under strong pressure from the United States. As a paramilitary commander in the recent peace conversations with the government declared: "we are the unrecognized children of the State".
2. *The support of influential intra-systemic social forces.* Though paramilitarism is an extremely variegated phenomenon, due to its regional and/or localistic character, it exhibits some invariants. One of them is the type of coalition behind it. It is practically impossible, for example, to find paramilitary phenomena without the staunch and organised support of cattle ranchers. It is not difficult to understand why: they were in the first line of the confrontation with the guerrilla, and have been (especially in the early 1980s) one of the main victims of kidnapping. A significant percentage of the paramilitary leadership, and of the politicians that back them, are

⁷ Romero (2002).

⁸ In Colombia, as in this paper, 'paramilitary' and 'self-defence' are both used to refer to these groups.

⁹ 'Camacho Leyva pide solidaridad ciudadana', *El Espectador* (3 September 1978), p.15.

¹⁰ For example, in one small town a group of retailers and cattle ranchers formed a security cooperative, canvassing the support of an army colonel who formed a paramilitary group funded by them, and trained and protected by military units (Expediente 1770, Juzgado del Circuito 002, Penal Especializado de Bucaramanga, Corte Suprema de Justicia, Sala de Casación Penal, 2 July 2002).

¹¹ For example, military found guilty for participation in paramilitary homicidal activities were immediately reinstated to their previous positions and activities, sent abroad to study, or promoted, while witnesses in their trials were killed (Proceso 19, Apelación de sentencia condenatoria, Tribunal superior de orden público, Sala de decisión, Roberto Lobelo v. agente especial Minst público, 30 January 1992).

¹² Henry de Jesús Pérez, quoted in Ana Lucía Gómez Mejía, 'Conflicto territorial y transformaciones del paramilitarismo', unpublished Masters thesis, Universidad de los Andes, 1999, p.24.

cattle ranchers (see Annexes 1 to 3). For example, according to Rocío Arias, a congressmember who openly nailed her colours to the paramilitary mast and who comes from a family of cattle ranchers and miners: her commitment is to the “citizens, and the cattle ranchers that supported me massively”.¹³ The paramilitary describe in the following way the main sources of opposition against ‘guerrilla oppression’: “peasants and settlers”, “cattle ranchers and farmers”, “agro-industrial entrepreneurs, merchants and miners”, and “deserters from several guerrillas”,¹⁴ though they believe the core (and the better part) of their support comes from cattle ranchers. The cattle ranchers associations and leadership have also frequently shown a barely concealed sympathy towards the paramilitary, both nationally and regionally, and the case that we examine here is no exception.¹⁵

3. *The support of a heterogenous set of members of the political establishment.* Estimating the degree and range of support is not an easy task, but it is indisputable that it has been there. According to Romero, the main political party of the country (the Liberals) has been particularly friendly to the paramilitary, for strategic reasons (the conservatives have tried to strengthen their constituency launching peace processes during their governments, and naturally the liberals have opposed them).¹⁶ However, there are simply more liberals allied with all the illegal forces (including the guerrillas) than members of any other group, because they constitute the biggest political family (even after years of decline).¹⁷ It must not be forgotten, though, that many Liberals are also victims of the bullets of those forces (including the self defences). On the other hand, the paramilitaries are colour-blind, and cooperate with anyone who accepts their basic premises. For example, in the first elections for governor (1992), a coalition was formed in the department of Córdoba that included the demobilised guerrilla M-19, other groups from the left, and Rodrigo García, a member of the most rightist faction of the conservative party, director of the Association of Cattle Ranchers, and a figure openly friendly towards the Castaño brothers (by then paramilitary leaders). The objective that cemented this heterogenous alliance was the undermining of the electoral hegemony of the Liberal Party, though it was ultimately defeated.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that the paramilitary have received a huge amount of support, funds, and information from members of several legal parties, and sometimes political leaders are very open regarding their support, as when council members from Montería decalred: “We can not deny or hide that the relative peace with have now is due to the presence of the Autodefensas, who established an equilibrium vis-à-vis the subversive attack”.¹⁹

Let us see now the other side of the coin. Despite the strong bonds between the realms of ‘intra-systemic activities’ (both political and economic) and ‘counter-insurgency’, in Colombia the paramilitary never developed as a state force, exclusively dedicated to fulfill

¹³ Cecilia Orozco, ‘El destape de Rocío y Eleonora. Sólo muertas nos pueden alejar del proceso’, *Revista Credencial*, 214 (September 2004), pp.34-38.

¹⁴ *El Tercer Actor*, 4, formerly at <http://www.colombialibre.org/>.

¹⁵ See, for example, ‘Concejo aprobó proposición - Respaldan propuesta de las AUC’, *El Meridiano (Córdoba)* (3 November 1999), pp.3A.

¹⁶ Romero (2002).

¹⁷ In other words, both the characterisation and the main piece of evidence that Romero offers are right, but his conclusion is not.

¹⁸ Romero (2002), p.34.

¹⁹ ‘Concejo aprobó proposición - Respaldan propuesta de las AUC’, *El Meridiano (Córdoba)* (3 November 1999), pp.3A.

strategic tasks that were technically beyond the army's reach; nor were they in a position to claim, as the Guatemaltecan paramilitary did, that they had won the war against the guerrilla for the state.²⁰ There are structural and evolutionary factors that explain well the distance between the paramilitary and the state. Among the structural factors, probably the most important is the paramilitary involvement in narcotrafficking. Against the paramilitary version of its own history (first they were 'clean', then they got corrupted, and finally they came back to their senses) such involvement started from the very beginning, and played a crucial role. It was the narcotraffickers who took the initiative to create an armed group, *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS, Death to Kidnappers) by 1981, whose success acted as a catalyst in the formation of similar organisations in other regions. The MAS had regional expressions, that acted as a franchise. However, there were some cases, where the antisubversive war had deep roots, that the direct narco-influence in the first years was not so visible, and the paramilitary could not be reasonably reduced to a military apparatus of organised crime. But even then big time criminals were providing funds and playing a directive role. By the mid 1980s, their direct influence was already overwhelming. In Puerto Boyacá and Urabá, two early paramilitary strongholds, according to a report by the intelligence agency of the presidency (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, DAS) "there was a confluence of interests of big landowners and cattle ranchers with leaders of narcotrafficking in the region, allied with elements of the military establishment". This has been the standard alloy paramilitarism has been made of since the 1980s. Furthermore, says the report:

through the figureheads and representatives of narcotrafficking (especially those of peasant perspective and formation) the disperse nuclei of paramilitary organisations and the one from Puerto Boyacá established contact.

The narcotraffickers provided to the coalition not only their military know-how and their boldness, but also a national and global network of suppliers, political supporters, and allies, which the cattle ranchers, with their proverbial localism and isolation, lacked.²¹

The Colombian state was supposedly in a two-front war, against subversion and narcotrafficking. These are global wars, and as an actor in them the Colombian state was a link in a very long chain. By trying to institutionalise and endogenise the principles of the war on drugs, the Colombian authorities triggered a virulent reaction by narcotraffickers, who started a terrorist campaign in the 1980s against both state and society. This destabilised the relation of the paramilitary with the state. In the war against subversion they were allies, at least in principle, while in that on drugs they were enemies. For the Reagan and Bush Senior US administrations drug trafficking was a problem of national security, while even in the midst of a vigorous growth the FARC and other guerrillas did not have any real possibility of protagonising a short term take-over. Furthermore, after declaring a war against the state, some heavyweight narcotraffickers started to flirt with the idea of a nationalist alliance with the guerrilla against the common enemy. The tension caused by this contradictory role of narcotraffickers (State ally, State adversary) autonomised the Colombian paramilitary. They

²⁰ See Gabriel Aguilera Peralta & John Beverly, 'Terror and violence as weapons of counterinsurgency in Guatemala', *Latin American Perspectives*, 7:2-3 (1980), pp.91-113. On studies about other paramilitary phenomena that help establish a contrast with Colombia, see: Susanne Jonas, 'Democratization through peace: the difficult case of Guatemala', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 42:4 (2000), pp.9-38; David Kowalewski, 'Counterinsurgent paramilitarism: a Philippine case study', *Journal of Peace Research*, 29:2 (1992), pp.71-84; and Michael Shafer, 'The unlearned lessons of counter-insurgency', *Political Science Quarterly*, 103:1 (1988), pp.57-80.

²¹ 'Situación de orden público en la región de Urabá', Investigación de homicidio múltiple DAS-Central de Inteligencia, 15 April 1988.

still seek to have a very close relationship with the army, but when they are able to actually take a region under their control they now play their own game; there is no full devolution of power to state agencies or to the traditional politicians. They have to do so, to respond to their constituencies and protect their rackets and relations with illegal businesses.

Also a technical-military factor comes into play. Contrary to Guatemala, the self defence groups did not militarily defeat the main guerrilla. In the 1980s there was a spectacular paramilitary offensive, which concluded with the eviction of the FARC from two key territories, Urabá and the Magdalena Medio. But in the 1990s the tables were turned, with the FARC starting to hit militarily the self-defence groups.²² True, the paramilitary expansion continued unabated, but this can not be attributed to its military superiority. Rather, it is related to a strategic problem. The Colombian army faces the same dilemmas as many armies that confront an irregular enemy. It has a vast technological advantage over it, but much less mobility. Since it can not be everywhere at the same time, it can snatch territories away from the guerrilla, but soon has to abandon them, which the guerrilla can take profit of by re-entering. Using the paramilitary as a rearguard that consolidates – with an antisubversive programme – the territories taken by the army, the strategic problem of mobility is solved. So the paramilitary have expanded as a policing force, dedicated to maintaining the social order in the rearguard.

Thus the Colombian paramilitary did not play the role of other Latin American vigilantes, whose task was to destroy the insurgency and/or the opposition exercising the utmost level of brutality to devolve power to the state. They did not do so because they were related to both the intrasystemic forces and a type of organised crime that was at war with the state. Additionally, their relation even with those intrasystemic forces that regionally and in certain periods supported them was quite ambiguous, as the example of the Liberal Party shows. The social forces that supported them had heterogeneous, sometimes openly contradictory, security demands. Furthermore, they were facing a very powerful and mobile guerrilla (the FARC), that did not depend on its close ties with the masses in any particular region of the country but rather on its military prowess, so the standard paramilitary strategy – ‘take away the water from the fish’ – only affected FARC’s territorial control, not its core organisational machine. Thus, the self-defence groups tended to specialise in the ‘internal front’, regionally preventing a guerrilla comeback, and trying to build forms of governance impenetrable to a new seizure by it.

This takes us to the evolutionary factors that give the Colombian paramilitary a *sui generis* status. In the beginning, there were already tensions between the members (current or future) of the paramilitary coalition and state officials. But in the mid-1990s there was a qualitative leap. After fifteen years of total inactivity, and under strong international pressures, a very weak Colombian government (Ernesto Samper, 1994-1998) finally started to fight the self-defence groups. The number of members captured, and even killed, suddenly rose (see Table 1). The paramilitaries have had a hard time trying to adapt to the new situation. They have tried to avoid confrontations with the army, but have been unable to do so. With other state agencies their relations have been much worse. The list of judges and prosecutors killed by the paramilitaries is very long. The same can be said of mayors, municipal council members, and other politicians. In 2002, when they finally decided to disassemble the national federation they had created in 1997, there were factions that were in favour of attacking state officials, and others that proposed refraining completely from such actions. They also had differences

²² See, for example, Carlos Salgado, ‘Casi todos los muertos son “paras”’, *El Tiempo* (18 May 2002), pp.1-3.

on practices like kidnapping, looting and narcotrafficking, that put them at odds with the state.

Table 1 – Number of Paramilitaries Captured, 1995-2003

Source: Vicepresidencia de la República

| Year | Number of paramilitary captured |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| 1995* | 83 |
| 1996 | 105 |
| 1997 | 113 |
| 1998 | 152 |
| 1999 | 252 |
| 2000 | 383 |
| 2001 | 442 |
| 2002 | 724 |
| 2003 | 1356 |

* No data pre-1995, but there is consensus that the paramilitaries suffered neither casualties nor captures by the state in that period.

Their relation with traditional politicians also cooled off. Initially the paramilitary protected the electoral preserves of traditional politicians from leftist penetration, and some of the worst massacres of the 1980s are related to this.²³ After their military victory in Urabá and Magdalena Medio, the most important positions within the regional and municipal governments fell to traditional politicians. This resulted in tensions. The paramilitary mistrusted the traditional politicians, because they included both staunch antisubversive figures and ‘appeasers’. The mistrust had practical expressions. For example, in 1983 the president of the Liberal Directory of Puerto Berrío was assassinated by the MAS in the environs of the Bomboná Battalion. He was a member of the committee of human rights, and had testified against the MAS. With time the paramilitary came to the conclusion that the politicians were totally concentrated on elections, corrupt, and unaware of the seriousness of the subversive challenge. By 1989, they were speaking in less than enthusiastic terms about the traditional politicians:

Politicians, sirs: the Peasant Self-Defence Groups will participate massively in the electoral process, we will vote, we will elect. But sirs, our votes will not go to old opportunists. We have had ugly experiences with the political class, who as greedy vote gatherers promise and mislead in pre-electoral periods to obtain the votes they need. But after elections they forget our regions, and our leaders and caudillos that helped them reach to the top, where they show off, exploiting our blood, our sweat, and our tears.²⁴

The paramilitaries thought the politicians were prone to unholy alliances, and took as evidence that several of the political triumphs of the Unión Patriótica, formed following the peace accords between President Betancur (1982-1986) and the FARC, were obtained in coalition with the Liberal and Conservative parties, neither of which had the least intention of

²³ See, for example, Proceso 19 Apelación de sentencia condenatoria, Tribunal superior de orden público, Sala de decisión, Roberto Lobelo v. agente especial Minst público, 30 January 1992.

²⁴ Proceso 1589, Delito: Concierto para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto - Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

pursuing an anti-subversive programme in a country that traditionally has favoured radical candidates. The logic of elections and the logic of war were not totally compatible.

However, it was after the deep transformation of the political landscape between the late 1980s and the early 1990s that the relation between the paramilitary and the traditional politicians changed fundamentally. First, the decentralisation of the country took place, with the direct election of mayors from 1988 (before they were appointed), allowing a much closer relation between them (and eventually governors) and armed illegal groups. This coincided with the deep fragmentation and de-institutionalisation of the major political parties. The self-defence groups – learning from lessons initially discovered by the guerrilla – found that the municipalities were the ideal niches to develop their activities, where they were able to compete on much better terms with established parties than in the national realm.

But this underscores a second evolutionary tension that the paramilitaries have been facing. They are a deeply particularistic force, both for social reasons (the localism and provincialism of some of the main components of the coalition that supports them) and, more recently, for strategic ones (penetrating the municipalities is much more profitable than acting nationally). At the same time, their rhetoric depends on some basic macro objectives that can only be served through a unitary and highly structured organisation: defeating subversion, or protecting Colombia's national unity, for example.²⁵ The paramilitary are rather obsessive in their comparison between the 'advance' of their regions and the stagnation of guerrilla dominated territories. Several of their major political operations – for example, opposition to peace processes with the guerrillas – have been supported on the notion that the paramilitary are the last force behind national unity.²⁶ Acceding to the much desired category of 'political organisation' implies developing a discourse that appeals to a mass constituency, which can alter the delicate regional balance that feeds paramilitarism.

Building a territory free of subversion: four stages

First period

Anyone that arrives in Puerto Boyacá will hardly fail to note a huge poster at the entrance of the town that warns the visitor that he is entering the "anti-subversive capital of Colombia". How did it acquire that status?

Since its creation in the late 1950s, Puerto Boyacá expressed centre-left political preferences. Though the population was, and still is, mainly liberal, it supported left wing splinter groups within the party and, when these failed to deliver, slowly but surely drifted towards more contentious groupings. In the 1970s, they were voting for the *Alianza Nacional Popular* (ANAPO) – created by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the hope that it would become a Peronist-type force – the Communist Party, and the *Unión Nacional de Oposición* (UNO, a Communist Party electoral front) (see Table 2).

In the meantime, the 4th Front of the FARC penetrated the region. From the very beginning the FARC collected the 'vacuna', a racket on cattle raising, that was later extended to other

²⁵ Mauricio Aranguren, *Mi confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos*, Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 2001; Bibiana Mercado & Orlando Restrepo, 'Castaño: "Va a haber muchos más mapiripanes"', *El Tiempo* (28 September 1997), p.8A.

²⁶ Omar Gutiérrez, 'La oposición regional a las negociaciones con el ELN', *Análisis Político*, 52 (2004), pp.34-50.

activities. People who did not pay on time, were very rich, or had connections with ‘the enemy’, were kidnapped. Landlords had to hire workers recommended by the FARC, and this offered the group both support networks and an invaluable source of information. All in all, however, the relation of the FARC with the whole of the population was quite fluid. It acted as a regulator of quotidian life, and offered a discourse of morality, order, and social change. It could even count on the leniency of the better off, who felt that the FARC’s firm hand with petty criminals and rustlers suited them well. FARC’s revolutionary sermons improved peasant morals, and this was compatible with increased work productivity and public order. Much later, the paramilitaries remembered with nostalgia the ‘golden age’ of FARC’s early territorial control. For example, a paramilitary leader, Pablo Guarín declared:

[H]onestly, their ideology was interesting, the leader of the front was a guy with political preparation, apparently he was a peasant, heavy-set, with a defined personality, extremely attached to the peasants... he was a peasant but he had polished off, so to say, within the Marxist-Leninist ideology, but he was a peasant.²⁷

Table 2-Electoral results 1972-1982 Puerto Boyacá – Municipal council

Source: Registraduría del Estado Civil.

| Political Party / Año | 1972 | 1974 | 1976 | 1978 | 1980 | 1982 |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Liberal Party | 512 | 4971 | 2077 | 1819 | 2499 | 2628 |
| Communist Party | 609 | | | | | |
| ANAPO | 295 | 274 | 32 | | | |
| UNO (Unión Nacional de Oposición) | | 1240 | 1429 | 2149 | 1258 | |
| Conservative Party | 42 | 170 | 74 | 91 | 76 | 64 |
| FUP-MOIR* | 40 | 0 | 162 | 188 | 0 | 108 |

* Frente de Unidad del Pueblo (political front of the Maoist organisation MOIR).

In sum, FARC’s legitimacy seems to have been related to the ‘cleaning off’ of small-time offenders and the establishment of social order in a territory devoid of effective mechanisms of social regulation. FARC’s presence was not related to any drive for social reform, despite scattered incidents of a Robin Hoodesque type.²⁸ A guerrilla member said after a massacre perpetrated by it in a nearby population, “we are going to clean the area of rustlers, thieves, an army informants”.²⁹ This fits well with its social programme,³⁰ which though it had its costs

²⁷ Fondo Documental Carlos Medina Gallego. Autodefensas, Paramilitares y Narcotráfico en Colombia. 1986 – 1990. Oral testimonies.

²⁸ According to Puerto Triunfo’s major, in 1981 the guerrilla took the town for three hours, looted its shops, and then distributed among the population the food it had stolen in another town (‘12 muertos en asaltos guerrilleros’, *El Tiempo* (26 November 1981), pp.1A-3^a). But these events are rare, and probably the result of a conscious and unsystematic imitation of the M-19 guerrillas.

²⁹ Proceso 1589, Cuadernos 8 y 11, Concierto para Delinquir, Bogota, March 1989.

(violence exercised against the population and quotas imposed on landlords), initially aroused nearly unanimous support.

This 'idyllic' situation did not last for two basic reasons. First, the guerrilla was rapidly growing in those years, and the state started to face the challenge seriously. Second, the FARC is a hierarchical organisation, and its *Secretariado* establishes mandatory quotas of financial and political growth for each front. Following the inertia of its own domination and the demands it got from above, the front started to kidnap key 'friends', cattle ranchers that had paid faithfully their *vacuna* and notables that played a dominant role in the town's social life. Extortions and punitive homicides skyrocketed, and affected more and more people. Moreover, FARC's growth is based on organisational fission (a strong front segregates small new ones), and when the 4th Front gave origin to the 11th, Puerto Boyacá dwellers found themselves feeding *two* organisational structures – an unbearable burden. The better off started to flee, and this had a double impact on the relation between the FARC and the locals: the Front translated the weight of its taxation to ever expanding social layers, and investment fell radically. The initial honeymoon gave way to a widespread and strong disaffection.³¹

As FARC leaders acknowledge, their military defeat was thus a direct consequence of the loss of their ties with the population. This gave the paramilitary the possibility to mobilise people against the FARC. In 1983, five hundred peasants marched from Puerto Boyacá to Bogotá, in a "pacific demonstration...against communist violence":

We are still living ...in a period of violence sponsored by the FARC, while the government stops the actions against the guerrilla to allow a peace comission to dialogue with it.

In the meantime, according to Luis Eduardo Ramírez, spokesman for the mobilisation, the FARC kept on kidnapping and killing. They previously had broad support, but "we stopped believing in them" when "they started to assassinate our families, take our children, and kidnap decent people".³² This was one of the first, but not the last, efforts by the paramilitary to promote mass mobilisations.³³

Though the notion that paramilitarism is a rebellion of 'small tenants' or 'peasants' is untenable, as will be seen below, it is a fact that by 1980 the social support to FARC's territorial support had waned, since ever growing layers had to contribute with a quota, investment was falling and recruitment increasing, and violence against 'shirkers' was getting worse and worse. Paramilitarism is the result of the convergence between the political isolation of the FARC in the region and the new strategic realities that were taking place in the country by the early 1980s. Narcotrafficking had already become a major problem, and violence had increased significantly. In particular, there are at least four national and regional factors that are linked to the virulent surge of paramilitarism in Puerto Boyacá:

1. The radicalisation of criminal groups, whose vital interests were being affected by the guerrilla;

³⁰ It should be stressed that the FARC did not promote changes in the agrarian property patterns, nor did it meddle with the Texas Petroleum Company, whose presence in the town was overwhelming and contested by social movements.

³¹ Medina (1990). In 1983, the Minister of Defence noted that the guerrilla had doubled the security quotas it imposed on cattle ranchers ('Guerrilla subió cuotas en el Magdalena Medio', *El Colombiano* (26 August 1983), p.1B).

³² 'Campesinos del Magdalena Medio piden reforzar control militar', *La República* (22 November 1983), p.3A.

³³ Gutiérrez (2004).

2. The strategic decision of important sectors of the army to create self-defence groups;
3. The creation of a cattle ranchers' association (ACDEGAM, Peasant Association of Cattlemen and Farmers of the Magdalena Medio) that developed a wide array of 'civic' activities and engaged in military activities;
4. The formation of an anti-subversive political constituency and network with two branches: first, control of the local Liberal Party was won by a more or less openly paramilitary faction, informed by the same vaguely radical political traditions that had such a strong appeal in Puerto Boyacá in the 1960s and 1970s (though with opposite intentions), and able to coordinate the neighbourhood associations while at the same time developing relations with national politicians that might strengthen funding for public works and security; and second, congress members lobbying for the Puerto Boyacá paramilitary.³⁴

The leadership both of ACDEGAM and the local MAS (which differed from that established by the Medellín cartel) expresses well the confluence between these factors. According to Captain Echandía, the first meeting to "create a self-defence organisation against the FARC" was summoned by the Lieutenant Colonel Jaime Sánchez Arteaga. It was attended by eight people who later held leadership positions within the paramilitary, of which one was member of the army, three were cattle ranchers, one an agro-industrial businessman, two landowners, and the last one a delegate of organised crime.³⁵ Other people that joined the early paramilitary structures as killers and/or organisers and ideologues also included peasants, lawyers, and guerrilla deserters, but almost all of them had essentially operational functions. For a long time the core leadership remained unchanged: a) army members (mainly from the Bárbula Battalion); b) cattle ranchers and landowners; and c) narcotraffickers and mafiosi.

ACDEGAM-MAS developed its external activity in three principal directions. Firstly, it started to cut off what it considered the social support for the FARC. This implied hitting the Communist Party, which by 1982 had disappeared electorally, but also awkward members of the Liberal Party.³⁶ It also assassinated cattle ranchers that supposedly collaborated with the guerrilla. Secondly, these selective killings were accompanied by homicidal punitive expeditions against populations that the paramilitaries considered hostile.³⁷

ACDEGAM also engaged in a conscious effort to give organisational structure to the movement. Despite its impressive buildup, paramilitarism was initially quite distant from any semblance of a disciplined group. Building an organised force with hierarchy and combat capacity involved direct army participation. Between 1981 and 1983 the army developed an organisational blueprint for the paramilitary, and an energetic recruitment campaign took place. At the beginning the organisation was voluntary, with a peasant membership that could have several motivations to fight the guerrilla – for example, people who were being extorted, or whose relatives had been maimed, kidnapped or killed – but

³⁴ See, for example, Francisco Leal & Andrés Dávila, *El sistema político y su expresión regional*, Bogotá: Tercer Mundo-Iepri, 1991.

³⁵ Document by Captain Echandía, in Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia No.6, Folios 245-248, Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad Dirección General de Inteligencia, Bogotá, D.E., 13 February 1990.

³⁶ See, for example, 'El MAS. Concejal Muerto, pieza clave de investigación', *El Tiempo* (22 February 1983), p.10A.

In Puerto Boyacá there was practically no conservative constituency.

³⁷ See, for example, Expediente: 1589, Delito: Concierto para delinquir, Cuaderno Copia Anexo #6, Folios 284-305, Bogotá D.E., 3 October 1989.

many simply acted under the orders of a big landowner.³⁸ The form that recruitment took seems to have involved a combination of rural labour contracts and military routines:

[T]he peasants of the region remained in their farms from Monday to Friday working, and Saturday and Sunday they gathered in military units where they got courses on intelligence and counterintelligence. When the peasant ended his course, he got his first class military ID, and besides he was already member of the self-defences.³⁹

At the hamlet level self-defence nuclei were created, with ACDEGAM funding but under more or less direct operational subordination to the S-2 Section of the Bárbula Battalion. This gave the paramilitary access to a heterogeneous popular membership. But precisely because of this recruitment evolved towards a more professional framework, passing through intermediary arrangements, for example with ‘unpaid’ patrollers being offered a “collaboration” for their “contribution” to the “security of the region”.⁴⁰

Troopers received ideological and military training as well. The ideological training included three stages. Initially, the instructors had to destroy “the feeling of fear that the peasants have with regard to the guerrilla” and teach the troopers the basics of the army’s psychological operations and regulations. The second phase was “moral and religious”, and oriented against the “atheist conception” expressed by the communists. It also included a “philosophical formation” on the history of international communism. Finally, the instructors focused on the history of the self-defence groups, the reasons for their struggle, and their relations with the authorities. The military training was a two or three week crash course, with the basic elements that are given to any professional soldier.⁴¹ The link between both dimensions – and what probably really remained in the heads of the troopers – were the catch words that were yelled while drilling: “I am counter guerrilla, and in my chest I carry hate against the communist guerrillas. I want vengeance, a lot of vengeance. I want blood, a lot of blood, to quell my thirst”.⁴²

Second period: enter narcotraffickers

Organised crime was part of the foundational coalition behind Puerto Boyacá’s paramilitarism. However, its participation was rather oblique, with the bulk of massacres and criminal activities carried out by cattle ranchers and army members. Mafiosi and narcotraffickers sympathised with the paramilitaries, funded them, and offered them their military experience and know-how, but did not conduct operations in the field (as, for example, they did through the national MAS). Furthermore, an examination of the weaponry used by ACDEGAM-MAS shows that, though it was an organisation of local notables, it was far below the level necessary for conducting a serious, full-fledged war effort. Paramilitary troops were armed with shotguns, pistols, machetes, weapons that can be quite effective to slaughter civilians and ‘take the water from the fish’, but not to confront the ‘fish’ itself. This is not the equipment of an army of narcotraffickers and/or emerald dons.

³⁸ Proceso 1589, Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

³⁹ ‘El enemigo de Escobar’, *Revista Semana*, 467 (6 April 1991), pp.14-22.

⁴⁰ Proceso 1589, Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁴¹ Proceso 1589, Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁴² Proceso Rubio/Declaración que rinde el señor Daniel Alfonso Coronel Castañeda, Juzgado 1ro de orden público, 9 August 1989.

By 1985, three processes had converged. ACDEGAM-MAS had been engaged in a permanent process of expansion, with massive recruitment and organisational build-up, and investments in patronage (drug stores, clinics, health campaigns, educational services) inspired by its politicians. All this was funded by cattle raising and ACDEGAM-MAS entered a fiscal crisis. By the late 1980s, it was cutting down the payroll.⁴³ Put simply, there were more needs than money. As a member of the self-defences declared when reflecting on their involvement in narcotrafficking: “the cattle rancher can not maintain let’s say 500 people, medicines for combatants, uniforms, clothes, he simply does not have the capacity”.

Second, narcotraffickers were investing massively in real estate – to launder money, acquire status and control regions – and thus becoming themselves huge landowners and cattle ranchers.⁴⁴ The process of regional economic integration of both economic activities – agriculture and cattle ranching, on the one hand, and narcotrafficking on the other – was very fast. In 1989, the authorities broke into the properties of two of the biggest narcotraffickers in Puerto Boyacá (Escobar and Rodríguez Gacha), and confiscated twelve properties, 4675 hectares, 1224 heads of cattle and an island in the Magdalena river.⁴⁵ Third, it is also possible that, given the critical state of their activity, some ranchers were at least marginally investing in illegal crops or drug processing.

Given all three factors, the strategic decision by the paramilitary of engaging massively, permanently and directly with narcotrafficking is not surprising. Though from the very beginning the criminal-paramilitary link was quite important, here we find a qualitative leap:

Our organisation works for the mafia, this happened more or less [by 1986] when I became a member...they found it was important and beneficial to get increased economic resources, so they told us: Boys, we are going to work with the mafia, helping them, giving them a bit of protection because they pay so very well, and after we separate from them.

According to another informant, by 1984 narcotrafficking had become a major funder of the self-defence groups, giving the cattle ranchers a financial respite, but at the same time creating a divide between ACDEGAM and the paramilitaries who were closer to the narcotraffickers.⁴⁶

One thing is having organised crime within a coalition, another is incorporating it as the main partner. This changed the landscape of Puerto Boyacá’s paramilitarism, and strengthened it in several ways. Above all, ACDEGAM-MAS’s fiscal crisis was solved, and the new funds offered the proper conditions for a vigorous territorial expansion. More or less everywhere in the countryside cattle ranchers (sometimes also agro-industrial entrepreneurs) were organising and creating paramilitary entities, using the Puerto Boyacá example, and soon they started to communicate and exchange experiences. By 1982, Víctor Carranza and Lieutenant Echandía had met in a cattle rancher assembly in La Dorada; in the following years the

⁴³ Expediente: 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia Anexo # 6 Folios 284-305, Bogotá D.E., 3 October 1989.

⁴⁴ Alejandro Reyes, ‘Compra de tierras por narcotraficantes’, in Dirección Nacional de Estupefacientes, *Drogas ilícitas en Colombia. Su impacto económico, político y social*, Bogotá: PNUD, Ministerio de Justicia, 1997, pp.279-346.

⁴⁵ Expediente 1589; : Concierto Para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia Anexo # 6 Folios 284 a 305; Bogota D.E., October 1989.

⁴⁶ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

Puerto Boyacá leaders would receive invitations from all the country. But now they had access not to one but to two genuinely national structures (the army and narcotics trafficking networks) to grow:

Through the narcotics trafficking figureheads (especially those of peasant extraction and mentality) contacts were established between dispersed self defence groups and the one that existed in Puerto Boyacá.⁴⁷

By the late 1980s Urabá's paramilitarism was seen basically as an outgrowth of Puerto Boyacá's; in Puerto Boyacá's hinterland (La Dorada, Puerto Triunfo) the paramilitary became the dominant force, though in the former they had to contend with the coolness towards them of the clientelist Liberal patron of the town, Víctor Renán Barco.

Expansion came hand in hand with new functions. By the late 1980s, a governmental report concluded that paramilitary troopers had basically four functions:

- a) Protect 'the community' and its properties from harassment by the guerrilla and rival groups;
- b) Watch over the personal security of the leaders both of the cartels and the self-defence groups;
- c) Produce cocaine in the laboratories of the organisation (and of course protect those laboratories);
- d) Organise attacks on the left, government officials, and political parties opposed to narcotics trafficking.⁴⁸

The new functions could be fulfilled because fresh resources allowed for both ever increasing recruitment and the provision of selective incentives to the members of the organisation. Recruitment of manual workers proceeded in a 'natural' fashion: some simply had been in the army, had liked it, and saw the paramilitary as a natural continuation of a career as a professional soldier. Others were labourers in the properties of the paramilitary, and got a salary as a common manual worker, although acting in a military capacity.⁴⁹

Who coordinated them [a group of paramilitary patrollers to whom the accused belonged] was a Salvador, administrator of a cattle ranch of Henry [de Jesús Pérez]. The patroller was a worker, and they paid him as a day labourer. The farm was stolen. He also worked in a ranch of Rodríguez Gacha [the narcotics trafficker].⁵⁰

This clearly was not an isolated case.

There seems to have also been a constant stream of applications, especially during the narco-paramilitary boom. Applicants had to have the recommendation of a cattle rancher, land

⁴⁷ See Proceso contra Ricardo Rayo y otros por concierto para delinquir y homicidio/Carta al Tribunal Superior de Orden Público, Fiscalía del tribunal superior de orden público, 26 September 1991; Proceso Rubio/Ampliación de la declaración del señor Rogelio de Jesús Escobar Mejía, Juzgado 1ro de orden público Bogotá, 2 August 1990; Carta de la procuraduría general de la Nación al Juez 1ro de orden público Roberto Lobelo V. agente especial Minst público, 7 December 1990.

⁴⁸ Proceso 1589, Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir Cuaderno Copia No. 6, Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁴⁹ Terrorismo 411- Fiscalía Regional Delegada Antinarcóticos, de Santafé de Bogotá D.C., 12 September 1993.

⁵⁰ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6 Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

owner, or narcotrafficker linked to the region (or of a high-placed paramilitary cadre). If accepted, they got a uniform and a salary. Those who were particularly fortunate, or stood out for their impressive discipline or performance, were incorporated in the cocaine laboratories of the organisation, as ‘cooks’ (i.e., informal chemists), where they had the opportunity of ‘taking off’, that is, entering the narco-business and becoming rich.⁵¹ The period saw a radical upgrading of the weaponry: the paramilitary of the second phase were armed with Galils, G-3s, Madsen’s and grenades; they had light aircraft, and a fleet of automobiles. Besides the continuing army training they could now count on global instructors, as befits a global business like narcotrafficking: ACDEGAM opened a school for its troopers and hired assassins, whose staff was honoured by the presence of (retired) Israeli Colonel Yair Klein and several British mercenaries.⁵²

Army officers were also retiring to join the self-defence groups. It was not only that there was a strong *de facto* cooperation; many of them expected to join the paramilitary as soon as they left the army, as the former offered far better economic perspectives and a more exciting organisational landscape. The new economic realities of ACDEGAM-MAS also played a role. ACDEGAM-MAS was boasting its riches, and treating the Bárbula Battalion with tips, food, Christmas gifts, automobiles, etcetera.⁵³ Another source of highly qualified (and brutal) combatants were the numerous ex-guerrilla members (many of them captured by the army in combat, and promised incentives if they accepted to work as informants) who joined the paramilitary ranks, giving the organisation an insider knowledge of the enemy, a much longer irregular combat experience than both the army and the paramilitary, and the know-how to address popular constituencies.⁵⁴

Despite all these advantages, this stage ended with the demise of ACDEGAM and the destabilisation of paramilitarism in the Magdalena Medio. What went wrong for the organisation? By the late 1980s, the war between narco-terrorism and the state was flaring. Army units were participating not only in counter-guerrilla, but also in anti-narcotic operations. The narcotisation of the paramilitary generated pressures from civilians and international actors on the army to break, or at least conceal, its alliance with them; at the same time it generated strong tensions within the state, which confronted the terrorist offensive by Pablo Escobar. The paramilitary had unwittingly tied their fate to the political behaviour of the Medellín Cartel, which had declared a war on the State: a “crazy adventure”, as the paramilitary leader Henry de Jesús Pérez called it.⁵⁵ Though the paramilitary had not yet been beaten in the field, they started to lose leeway. One of their political leaders, Luis Rubio, an ACDEGAM cadre, was jailed, accused of being the intellectual author of a series of hideous crimes and massacres. In 1991, Ariel Otero (a paramilitary commander) demobilised, declaring that his primary reason for taking this step was that “among the objectives of the self-defences it was never considered to confront the government [state] that created us”.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6 Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁵² ‘Ex militar inglés habla de su participación en los entrenamientos de los grupos paramilitares de Gacha’, *El Espectador*, 10 September 1994.

⁵³ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6 Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁵⁴ Situación de orden público en la región de Urabá. Investigación de homicidio múltiple DAS-Central de Inteligencia, 15 April 1988.

⁵⁵ ‘El enemigo de Escobar’, *Revista Semana*, 467 (6 April 1991), pp.14-22.

⁵⁶ In a paramilitary manual written by him (Terrorismo 411- Fiscalía Regional Delegada Antinarcóticos, de Santafé de Bogotá DC, 12 September 1993).

But the *social* coalition behind paramilitarism also suffered a fracture. Some cattle ranchers of the old paramilitarism were evicted from the region by new commanders who coveted their lands. The narcotraffickers also started to “kidnap our friends, the cattle ranchers of the region”.⁵⁷ But at the same time the new paramilitary invested a great amount of time buttressing their businesses and personal undertakings, at the expense of the collective security of land tenants and cattle ranchers. Some ranchers started to see the paramilitary as an alien force. One of the creators of paramilitarism in the region says that Henry Pérez thought:

that the cattle ranchers had to pay a quota willingly or unwillingly, and then I told him I am not into that, we do not do that, we are not in a business, we are here to defend our properties.

Finally, the paramilitary and the Cartel, as apparatuses, were also falling out with each other. Ramón Isaza had combatted Pablo Escobar (as an alien, extra-regional force), and soon other commanders followed suit, especially when they increasingly clashed with narcotraffickers on distributional issues. Common patrollers, for example those who came from the guerrilla or the army, started to express their alarm, because the paramilitary were focusing mainly on their businesses and laboratories instead of combating the communist scourge.⁵⁸

The point should not be overstated, though. During the 1990s, the paramilitary could still speak as the spokesman of the cattle ranchers. For example, in 1996 an open letter was sent to the Interior Minister, Horacio Serpa, expressing their readiness to start a peace process, and their conviction that “the only thing we have done is help the governments indirectly, defending the cattle raisers and the peasants, and bringing peace and tranquility to the region”.⁵⁹ Given the economic integration of narcotrafficking and agriculture and livestock, landowners were sponsoring massacres to solution social conflicts, like land invasions. But the relatively unified support for paramilitarism did not manifest itself only in the private realm. When Luis Rubio was captured, an open letter from the Committee of Cattle Ranchers of ten towns was published in the main national newspaper of the country, showing eloquently that they were behind Rubio and the army:

Our army has always counted on the support of our peasants to fight against the communist guerrilla that tried to seize our farms. The reason for this open letter is to state our most emphatic protest against the slanders towards some members of the army, Mr. Luis Rubio, mayor of Puerto Boyacá, and landowners of this area. We want to notify to the guerilla that we will only leave our farms when nobody stays to defend them. We invite all the people to visit us to enjoy the true peace that has been made possible our great agricultural and cattle riches.⁶⁰

Thus cattle ranchers were still supporting paramilitarism for all they were worth. But at the same time they were disappointed by the brutality and high-handedness of the new bosses. Part of their concern was related to organisational problems within the self-defence groups. As we saw, in the beginning they were the instrument of an association of local and regional notables. With growth and upscaling this changed. The influx of qualified cadres filled the

⁵⁷ ‘El enemigo de Escobar’, *Revista Semana*, 467 (6 April 1991), pp.14-22.

⁵⁸ Manuel Pérez Martínez, ‘El surgimiento del movimiento de autodefensa, su estructura y sus relaciones con las Fuerzas Armadas y el narcotráfico’, unpublished dissertation, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, n.d.

⁵⁹ “‘Paras’ de Puerto Boyacá piden cita al gobierno, *El Espectador* (31 January 1996), p.11A.

⁶⁰ ‘El Magdalena Medio unido’, *El Tiempo* (1 October 1988), p.8A.

ranks with newcomers from the lower middle class, sometimes people that came from a manual working class background and that had learned to use weapons in the guerrilla or the army. Some of the best performing patrollers had access to laboratories, and a few of them became rich and bought land. Medellín Cartel members were compulsive land buyers; and both the latter and the former were insolent and aggressive.⁶¹ The old leadership was also drifting away, towards narcotrafficking.

For the cattle ranchers, the quality of vigilantism declined, and now uncertainty was also hitting them, even if marginally: they could be expropriated, even killed:

Well, when the stuff changed... it was exaggerated, when the mafiosi arrived they had immediately a security body and they would ask any suspicious person his ID and his reasons to be in the area, the process was getting worse though, you could ask any hired gun to kill someone for sixty dollars, no matter if he wasn't a guerrilla. That way all of us were suspicious.⁶²

The paradox is that this paramilitary autonomisation was taking place in parallel with an effort to build a working bureaucracy that would enhance its fire power. With new weapons, cadres and communications, the paramilitary leaders had hoped to build a proper organisation. Troopers were endowed with uniforms, and a set of rules (independent of the army regulations) was established: they could not smoke in the night; could not steal; should obey their superiors; had to attend military exercises every morning; and should not drink while training.⁶³ But steal they did, and killed also, and what is really alarming, on their own initiative or whim. Hence the provision of selective incentives severely deteriorated paramilitary's discipline and thus the security of cattle ranchers and landowners.

Thus, on the one hand the paramilitary were undermining their social base, and on the other they were being pushed towards a confrontation with the state: both intolerable outcomes. This lead Henry de Jesús Pérez to declare war on the Medellín Cartel.

Autonomisation

In the conflict that ensued, the old paramilitarism disappeared. Its leadership was, with just a few exceptions, physically removed from the game: assassinated (Henry de Jesús and Gonzalo Pérez in 1991, Ariel Otero in 1991, Pablo Guarín in 1987) or jailed (Luis Rubio, as well as several of the low- and mid-rank officers that served in the 3rd, 5th and 14th Brigades). The paramilitary hit back by offering the state information: Pérez claimed that an alliance had been formed with the Cali Cartel, which was by then protagonising a ferocious confrontation with its Medellín peers.

After the killing of Henry Pérez, the leadership of the self defence groups fell to Ariel Otero, an ex-policeman, who continued the war with the Medellín Cartel, both at the military and political levels. At the same time he crafted and implemented at lightning speed a demobilisation that involved more than three hundred people. It was basically a failure, in part because Otero himself was killed (by Carlos Castaño, who was by then the rising paramilitary star in another region).

⁶¹ Pérez (n.d.), p.103.

⁶² Pérez (n.d.), p.102.

⁶³ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6 Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

The paramilitary were, thus, in a deep crisis. But they did not disappear. By 1992 the press was denouncing its reactivation. The new set of paramilitary leaders included one or two of the survivors of the old experiment (Nelson Lesmes and Iván Roberto Duque, for example). The process of full fledged involvement with narcotrafficking had badly hurt the paramilitary unity, and building it up again proved impossible. Bloody disputes ensued, and Otero was succeeded by three commanders, all of whom were later murdered.

By 1996, a feasible territorial distribution was arrived at. A semblance of command chain was re-established: a 'military junta', as it was called by its protagonists, was formed, but soon the three members of the junta deferred to Víctor Triana (aka 'Botalón'). Ramón Isaza in Antioquia, Botalón in the north of Puerto Boyacá, along with other minor figures, became the new bosses. Both Botalón and Isaza were interested in turning back to the source of original strength of the paramilitaries: localism. This new strategy was ideally adapted to the institutional reforms that were part a broad reformist drive that took place within the Colombian polity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and one of whose core aspects was decentralisation. Now the paramilitary focused on winning to their cause (via cooptation, threat, or a combination of both) elected local and regional officials, who could offer them impunity, rents (the standard 10 percent of municipal taxes that war lords collect in Colombia), and political support. As with many other actors in the 1990s, the paramilitaries discovered that 'small is beautiful' (and, again as with many others, found that this was actually a rediscovery). Localism implied a more or less explicit rejection of national structures, and an acute awareness of new political alternatives and discourses. Indeed, they endorsed the attack on 'traditional politics' – corrupt and slick. For example, in 1994 a movement called 'The People's Movement' appeared, which furiously opposed the clientelistic politics of the Liberal chief Víctor Renán Barco. Its epicentre was La Dorada, but it influenced the neighbouring municipalities. It had the open endorsement of the paramilitaries, and obtained a resounding electoral victory in 1994 when it was able to defeat Barco in the elections for mayor. Thus Gómez became mayor, though he soon ended up in jail due to endless corruption scandals.

Localism, however, collided with an effort at unification that was taking place at the same time, headed by the paramilitaries of Urabá – with whom the Puerto Boyacá force had had a very close relation – who, by 1997-1998, had created a national paramilitary federation, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). The trajectory of the AUC is quite similar to the one narrated here: an initial coalition of cattle ranchers,⁶⁴ agroindustrial entrepreneurs and narcotraffickers that put into movement an antisubversive force, and discovered on the move the need of formalizing its structures and forming an army. Actually, the AUC paramilitary had the double expectation of copying the FARC's centralised structures and defeating it by a strategy of punitive expeditions against the population and massacres.⁶⁵ But the AUC was unable to fulfil its objectives. Resistance from regional paramilitarisms, the change in the nature of the coalition that backed it (with the ever increasing role of narcotraffickers), and its inability to defeat the FARC militarily, led to its *de facto* dissolution. By 2002 it came formally to an end.

⁶⁴ 'Los diálogos de Castaño y los ganaderos', *El Espectador* (27 May 2001), p.4A.

⁶⁵ Mercado & Restrepo (1997); 'La pesadilla paramilitar', *Cambio16* (7 October 1996), pp.12-16.

Poor, nasty, brutish, and long

Now let us take a look at the way in which paramilitary governance presently works. Clearly the Puerto Boyacá paramilitary have changed in the last twenty years, with a growing fragmentation in the provision of security. Such provision can be considered from two points of view: 'internal' (the structure of the organisation, its types of contracts and incentives, etcetera); and 'external' (the identification of targets of violence, the level of threat and force used against them, the type and intensity of control, etcetera).

1. Organisational configuration: hierarchies and selective incentives

Regarding the internal aspects, it seems clear that the paramilitary have failed to build a strong bureaucracy. Presently, the organisational build-up is meagre. The commanders are no longer grouped in a 'military junta', nor are they related to some centralising force like the army. Each commander is established in a distinct territory that in theory should not be invaded by others. Commanders have below them a level of 'subcommanders', who in turn have available a set of aides for purposes of war, administration and social mobilisation. Subcommanders have two types of obligation to commanders: first, they are responsible for an adequate provision of security in the areas in which they are in charge, guaranteeing that common delinquency cannot operate and that the guerrilla is not in the area; second, they are responsible for financial management.

Below these are the patrollers. The line of command, thus, is extremely short. All the patrollers are paid from 200 to 300 dollars, depending on the situation. The service pay seems to depend on the closeness of the guerrilla. In some groups we found that the paramilitary got different types of compensation. Some were paid in kind, for example getting a market every two or three weeks, and clothes every six months or so. In others, patrollers received a payment in kind plus a very small salary. A substantial portion received a straight salary. To the old mechanisms of recruitment described above, another has been added: an open summons for applicants that are evaluated by recruitment officers. The paramilitary are fundamentally a male force; women are seldom seen in their camps, except in the capacity of social activists or political leaders, cooks or (eventually) prostitutes.

2. The relation between the self-defence groups and the local government: parasitism

In contrast with the ACDEGAM-MAS period, there is no autonomous political leadership; the armed apparatus concentrates all of the paramilitary activity. It is through pressure on, and links with, municipal authorities that the paramilitary seek to maintain their territorial grip. As with other illegal actors, the paramilitaries have given up the idea of political action above and against political intermediation. They support one group or another. However, in the region, they have clearly favoured political options that go against the traditional parties.

The electoral influence of the paramilitary groups is focused on the election of mayors.⁶⁶ They offer logistical support, such as transportation to rural areas, bodyguards, and taking people from the rural areas to the urban ones so they can register their IDs to vote. These registrations are often illegal because the people are not local inhabitants. They also proselytise in favour of their candidate. If he is elected, he will funnel resources to the paramilitary. The paramilitary put pressure on the opposition, to avoid any corruption scandal. Another way of getting money coming from the local budget is through municipal

⁶⁶ 'Paras, exigen cuotas a alcaldes', *El Tiempo* (27 April 2004), pp.1-7.

contractors, who the paramilitary force to give 10 percent of the total contract amount. From time to time they even choose the name of the contractor, and this of course is also a source of political resources (patronage among professionals).

How do the paramilitary milk the local administrations? Firstly, the mayors have the obligation to cooperate with the self-defence groups no matter if they were supported or not during the campaign. Obviously the candidate that was actually supported has a higher obligation. Secondly, the paramilitary do not establish a fixed quota, but rather ask for resources when they need them, such as buying uniforms, weapons, supplies, etcetera. This is camouflaged through third party municipal contracts. Having an elected mayor seems to offer the advantage of being able to extract resources through friendly means, not through coercion, which in the long run is much more profitable.

3. Order and coercion

In parallel with this, the self-defence groups try to complement conventional politics through at least two types of activities. On the one hand, repressing small time criminals, thieves and rustlers (a practice they clearly inherited from the guerrilla). The paramilitary have learned to graduate their repressive activity. In the 1980s, they delivered a maximum of three warnings to the given delinquent, on pain of death. Now, along with the warnings, they have other mechanisms: forced labour, and 're-education' (especially for thieves and drug addicts) through rural work. They can also let the family of the potential victim intervene when they are discussing the assassination of a delinquent. Rapists and drug vendors (at least those that are not formally accepted by the organisation) are killed on the spot.

If some of these killings, through a combination of fear and assent, help the paramilitaries build a broad social support, other ways of linking the armed group to society create several internal divisions. The fracture seems to take place along a single variable: ruralism. In the south, Ramón Isaza opposes the formation or expression of any kind of popular organisations; his ban on trade unions, cooperatives and the like is categorical. In the north, Botalón not only tolerates trade unionism and collective action not controlled by the paramilitary, as long as it clearly distances itself from the guerrilla, but he has occasionally supported workers in negotiations and protests against petroleum companies, providing union workers with resources, security and bodyguards, and offering them protection against possible reprisals.

4. Rent seeking

The same general trend can be observed regarding rent seeking and taxing the population. Isaza always opposed a too intimate relationship with narcotraffickers, and has tried to prevent coca growing in his territories. Others commanders, instead, have nothing against narco-rents. In the territories of the latter, the relation between a narcotrafficker and the paramilitary is established in the following way. As soon as a narcotrafficker from the north of Valle or from Antioquia buys land in Puerto Boyacá, he is visited by a paramilitary cadre who offers him security. The narco explains his plans (install a 'kitchen', i.e., a lab), and his security requirements. On the basis of this, a quota is agreed upon. Contrary to other paramilitarisms, and to what happened in Puerto Boyacá in the recent past, the narcos have no direct incidence on the paramilitary organization. It may be that some paramilitaries own 'kitchens', but then this is reserved for the leadership.

Several commanders are deep into the illegal commerce of gasoline. The theft of gasoline follows one of two possible patterns:

- a) The paramilitary hire their men to milk the pipeline, and then distribute the gasoline through a network of legal and illegal gas stations. The illegal gas can cost half the legal one;
- b) Professionals of gasoline robbery pay the paramilitary a quota to be allowed to milk the pipeline.

Gasoline theft is a source of huge economic *and* political resources, because a dense network of people benefits from the activity. At the same time, the illegal nature of the paramilitary economic empire feeds the misgivings of cattle ranchers and government officials, not to speak of the rest of the population. According to interviewed cattle ranchers:

As far as I know the guerrilla blackmailed so much that the cattle ranchers could not go to their farms because they could be kidnapped..., and little by little the self-defence groups were created. At the beginning they controlled themselves, but now they are involved in gasoline theft and all that stuff that is not their function.

...well, in the self-defence groups some people are watching out in the fields, and the heads are the ones who are making money out of anyone who arrives to the region. That's why that's a business. It's all right, they protect us but that's a business. Nowadays if you ask: whose that farm? The answer is: it's from some people of the self-defence groups.

Mandatory quotas vary depending on if it is a rural or an urban area. In the rural areas the owners of farms and ranches must pay monthly to the paramilitary from \$0.70 to \$1.00 per hectare. In the urban areas, businessmen have to pay between 5.00 and 50.00 dollars a month, depending on the size of their undertaking.

It is clear that there are differences between rural and urban areas. First, there is an older tradition of paying the tax in the country than in the urban areas. Second, the structure of the population that pays the security quota to the self defence groups is less heterogeneous in the country than in the urban areas. In the country, the people that pay are basically cattle ranchers, while in the urban areas, anyone who owns a shop or store has to pay: restaurants, gasoline stations, bars, etcetera. They are less willing to pay, as they have not lived the experience of war, massive kidnapping, etcetera. Third, most of the income the paramilitary receive through mandatory quotas comes from the country. The 'obligations' that cattle breeders have with the paramilitary go further than tax payment; they have to give additional money when the paramilitary ask for it, and some contribute willingly. They say it is given in the interests of the war.

In Ramón Isaza's zone, the old harmonic relation between cattle ranchers and self defence groups has been preserved. There is no narco-economy, which implies a strong dependence on the resources extracted from the population. On the other hand, Isaza's fief is adjacent to guerrilla territory. In contrast, in Puerto Boyacá the paramilitary are more flexible with quotas. There is a narco-economy, and the guerrilla is far away. People can bargain and dodge over the time due and amount of the quota, counting on a certain degree of paramilitary flexibility. People (and the paramilitary themselves) say the petroleum companies also pay their quota. On the contrary, in La Dorada the paramilitary are greedy, but the population is not very willing to pay. There is no tradition of social links to defeat a

common enemy; the paramilitary are basically running a racket. Since they cannot use force against everybody, all the time (among other things, this would put them at odds with the authorities), they have reduced the amount of the quota twice. There were even people who at the beginning did not take seriously the fact that they had to pay a quota to the paramilitary groups.

All in all, a deep transformation is obvious: both Botalón and Isaza have learnt to calculate keeping in mind long-term horizons, which involves higher levels of self control, replacement of pure repression by less expensive mechanisms, and an increased awareness of the importance of guaranteeing the sustainability of their territorial control. Naturally, this does not prevent occasional outbursts of murderous violence.

Discussion and analysis

Now we are prepared to sketch an answer to the three questions put forward at the beginning of this paper.

1. Does the Colombian war have a social content?

Or is it only a conflict between more or less identical warlords? In this regard, the trajectory of the Puerto Boyacá paramilitary reveals some important aspects that can easily go unnoticed. The main one is the asymmetric character of the Colombian war. Indeed, those who stress the weakness of the FARC's political support among the peasants are correct. On the one hand, the FARC has acted as a police force that disciplines the population, and shoots on it; and it has never been able to build a mass constituency. On the other, the FARC is an organisation that challenges the state, and is permanently caught between the macro-demands of organisation building and the micro-demands of guaranteeing stability in the regions where they establish their control. The paramilitary, instead, were the product of a mass rejection of the FARC's control by cattle ranchers, agroindustrial entrepreneurs, and narcotraffickers. When the rejection found an organisational expression, it could count upon broad support. This is a phenomenon that appears to be behind all the Colombian paramilitary experiences with a minimum of regional-social roots. For example, in Urabá a governmental report asserts that the strength of the trade unions and the guerrilla penetration "apparently exceeded the threshold of entrepreneurial tolerance, leading them to create their own groups of protection".⁶⁷ Cattle ranchers at the regional level have been particularly candid regarding their enthusiastic support of paramilitarism. When paramilitary commanders from Córdoba and Urabá claimed that they were also 'civil society', they were not so far from the truth: indeed they express powerful forces within civil (or incivil, if you want) society.⁶⁸ The basic asymmetry of the Colombian war consists in that, while the main challenge to the state (the FARC) had a strong apparatus but an almost nonexistent mass movement behind, the paramilitary had a weak apparatus but very strong social support.

This very simple contrast appears to have had deep consequences, easily recognisable as soon as one accepts the idea that 'wars have their own grammar' (in this case, far reaching unintended social consequences). The paramilitary started as a project of the agrarian rich, who provided paramilitarism with its core leadership (see Annexes 1 to 3). They also gave

⁶⁷ Proceso 1589 Delito: Concierto Para Delinquir, Cuaderno Copia No. 6 Folios 86-172, Secreto Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Bogotá D.E., 16 March 1989.

⁶⁸ 'Ante la subversión: El Estado está perdiendo la guerra diplomática', *El Meridiano*, (9 September 1998), p.3A.

their resources, their contacts, and their knowledge of each region. This allowed them to expand incessantly, evicting the guerrillas from ever-expanding territories. However, this was not sufficient, because the FARC did not depend critically on its contact with the masses; it was not strictly a ‘fish’ and could survive without the water. The asymmetric character of the war (the mobilisation of the agrarian rich against an apparatus managed by peasants but with weak support amongst manual workers) offered the paramilitary a window of opportunity to build a strategy that was successful in terms of territorial expansion, but inefficient in terms of military balance. Actually, in the 1990s and 2000s, *at the same time* that the FARC was territorially stagnating, and eventually shrinking,⁶⁹ it was landing heavy blows on the paramilitary. While in the 1980s the paramilitary defeated the FARC in at least two territories, in the 1990s the latter systematically defeated the former in the field.

In the course of the war, the paramilitary leadership suffered big losses. Furthermore, the maintenance of a force of hundreds or thousands of patrollers is too much of a toll for an inefficient and backward economy such as Colombian cattle ranching. On the other hand, new figures reached the top through the ‘natural dynamics’ of war. Ex-guerrillas, retired low-rank army officers, in general people with the skills and capacities to perform well specific activities related to war (fighting, killing, marching, organising) started to get the upper hand within the self-defence groups. Curiously, this implied the transformation of paramilitarism from a ‘social’ expression (of cattle ranchers, agroindustrialists, and criminals) into a ‘technical’ one: commanded by people coming from the lower social strata, but ‘unrooted’, expressed by the organisational transition from a triplet (guild-party-militia) to a unit (militia). In the beginning, paramilitarism was the armed expression of a social coalition. In the end, we find an armed apparatus imbued with praetorianism.

How does this praetorian guard work? Its leadership still includes some cattle ranchers, but already does not depend on them. It still defends the rich, but also extorts from them. The bias in favour of the rich depends basically on the fact that they are the agents that can pay better. Self defence groups act as a police force, in the rearguard of the fight against subversion, and in that capacity they do not need decisive fire power to confront the enemy: what they need is the double capacity of coercing an unarmed population and interacting with state agencies through a combination of bribe and threats. The rural rich have weakened in the course of the war (at least regarding their presence in the self defences), and now experts in lethal violence and extortion lead the field. This is a process that resembles the “democratisation of violence” that Franchetti found when he looked into the social roots of the the mafia in Sicily.⁷⁰

2. How are criminality and the private provision of security related?

In their explanation of the creation of modern state, Olson and Tilly coincide in granting central importance to criminality. According to Olson’s model, “roving bandits” eventually turn into “stationary bandits”, who have a deep-seated interest in promoting the enrichment of the population they control: the richer the victim, the better the opportunities to milk him. An elementary present value calculation shows that it is in the best interest of the bandit to limit his rent extraction, so as to give economic agents the opportunity to accumulate. Gradually, extorsions and rackets become taxes, the need to inspire fear is replaced by the need to control, and big organisational apparatuses appear.⁷¹ One could add here that, in this context,

⁶⁹ ‘Los “paras” avanzan, las Farc se repliega’, *El Tiempo* (2 December 1997), p.6A.

⁷⁰ Leopoldo Franchetti, *Politica e mafia in Sicilia*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1995.

⁷¹ Olson (1993).

the repression of small time criminality represents a perfect convergence between economic and political objectives: it allows stationary bandits to establish a monopoly on rackets and extortion, and at the same time offers them the opportunity of legitimising through the provision of security. Tilly's and others's accounts basically show how is this linked to territorial expansion. Territorial expansion and consolidation are linked to institutional homogenisations, transformation of rackets into taxes, organisational build-up, and functional differentiation between border maintenance and policing.⁷²

Something different seems to be happening in Colombia, where there is a slow but noticeable transit from the pure use of terror to more nuanced forms of control. At the same time, the paramilitary have tended to monopolise criminal rent extraction, and as seen above have built their legitimacy on the repression of petty criminals. But all the factors discussed in the previous paragraph do not appear to be correlated with a state-building process, or with an evolution of roving to stationary banditism. Actually, things have run in the other direction. Stationary avengers have been replaced by fragmented, roaming militias. This is accompanied by three key processes:

- a) The triplet guild-politics-militia collapsed into small militias, that are uncoordinated, and work through a system of delegation;
- b) Increasing centrality of racketing. In the beginning, ACDEGAM-MAS collected voluntary quotas from cattle ranchers, criminals, and landlords. It was an undertaking conceived and funded by the rural rich. Now the quota is collected from a broader population: taxi drivers, shopkeepers, etcetera, are milked. But this only operates on the basis of an immediate threat (i.e., it is not a taxing but a racket system);
- c) An increasing territorial fragmentation. The 'territory free of subversion' was divided into several fiefdoms, each of them having its own idiosyncratic rules. Furthermore, Puerto Boyacá's paramilitarism is based on a system of territorial delegation, so each commander gives a zone to a subcommander, who has latitude to impose his own rules, exactly contrary to Tilly's homogenization.

Why did this happen? At least three factors have played an important role here. First, Colombia is waging two wars – against subversion and narcotrafficking – which are global and partially contradictory. This tends to breakdown and fragment the social coalition behind paramilitarism, as the security demands of one sector may not be compatible with those of the others. For example, cattle ranchers may enthuse about the presence of antinarcotic forces, or at least tolerate them, in their regions, while big time criminals do not. Furthermore, there are many crucial conflicts that do not depend on internal, national, decision-making (extradition or aerial fumigation, for example). This lends Colombian paramilitarism its extremely volatile character, with permanent internal feuds and cycles of breakdown and restructuring. Second, the strategic role that the self-defence groups have played, as a rearguard consolidating the anti-subversive expansion, has fragmented the state itself. It has done so at least in two senses. On the one hand, functionally: in practice, the expansion of paramilitarism has meant a fracture between policing and social control and the other functions of the state. This means that the strengthening of social control has not worked in the interest of a strengthened state (it has undermined it organisationally). In other words, the proliferation of paramilitarism has entailed a brusque fracture between territorial expansion of the anti-subversive coalition and policing. This is a key point, given that modern standard statism is a result of a confluence of both, while the Colombian situation is clearly divergent.

⁷² Tilly (1985). See also Giddens (1987).

On the other hand, since the self-defence groups have a very real degree of autonomy, there is no 'devolution': after a region is paramilitarised and the guerrilla is evicted, the state remains as an oligopolist, that shares power with another actor. Sharing power is not always comfortable, or even feasible, due to several factors: institutional (the rules of the game of the state are different from the paramilitary ones); bureaucratic and territorial conflicts (central organisations try to overcome peripheral resistance); international constraints, etcetera. All this reveals the extremely ambiguous character of the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia that is linked to the state in all possible manners: as an ally, as a competitor in an oligopolistic market for the provision of security, as a parasite, and as a military adversary.

Third, the change in the very nature of paramilitarism, due to the duration of the war, from a triplet (guild, party, militia) of the agrarian rich, into a more autonomous militia, oriented by specialists in the techniques of lethal violence. In some regions, the cattle ranchers have cooled off in their attitude towards the paramilitary, due to the heavy quotas they have to pay and the obvious failures in the paramilitary provision of security (arbitrary and exhibitionist violence by people who are not bounded by a bureaucracy and have direct access to the means of coercion, etcetera).⁷³ It is true that levels of support remain high and there are as yet no real incentives to search for alternatives to the paramilitary control. But while the initial effort of the cattle ranchers was directed by the hope of winning the antisubversive war, presently the militias are intent on maintaining a long term control, in territories where no single class has the economic clout to sustain them; in this sense Isaza clearly represents the past, not the future, of paramilitarism. Presently, an open operational cooperation with the army can have high costs, and the paramilitary are chased and prosecuted, however bashfully, by the state's justice. Their main optimisation problem is to avoid visibility by the centre and at the same time maintain a big enough fire power so as to be able to repress small time criminality and political resistance, put pressure on municipal authorities, fulfill the security demands of landowners and cattle ranchers, and extract rents for all this. This entails bounds to the organisational buildup. Regarding rent extraction, such a development implies a certain universalisation (presently nearly everybody pays), but, given bureaucratic weakness, the only way to guarantee a universal collection of quotas is through direct, unmediated threats or through the artificial creation of a menace by a third party. In other words, rent extraction has 'frozen' at the level of racketeering, and the coalition behind the military force did not gradually open.

In a word, the private provision of security is indeed related both to criminality and stateness, in complex ways. As in Olson's account, "in the origin there was crime". Colombian warlords have legitimated part of their territorial control by killing thieves and rustlers: they have taken profit from a security failure; in *this* they are nearly identical. Furthermore, the social coalition that created the self-defence groups included criminal forces, interested in monopolising the exercise of organised coercion. But all this was fragmentary and volatile: the lengthy character of the Colombian wars, the tensions between them, and the nature of the paramilitary force (and coalition behind it), prevented the convergence between the territorial expansion of the state and the crucial function of policing, which, in turn, did not only change the state but the paramilitary themselves.

⁷³ Germán Castro Caicedo, *En secreto*, Bogotá: Planeta, 1996.

3. How do the methods used to manage and implement organised violence relate to social order?

Paramilitarism was born as an armed guild of the rural rich; but it also stemmed from a conscious effort to learn from the guerrilla, improving and broadening its governance techniques. Even some of the early paramilitary understood that to become a feasible alternative they would eventually have to replace pure force with something else, and in this sense the FARC provided a valuable blueprint. While they imitated FARC practices such as the use of a network of informants, the collection of payments based on estimates of the amount of land, cattle or bushes of the given owner, and the repression of deviants and transgressors (like rapers or drug consumers), they introduced improvements in at least three key areas. First, under paramilitarism, people are rallied around a unifying theme: regional progress, which in practice means investment, security, and state presence. Under the territorial control of the guerrilla – whose relation with the state is basically confrontational – state agencies that could promote development and wellbeing were unwelcome. Investment was discouraged, due to increasing quotas and instability of the rules of the game. According to Nelson Lesmes:

and the guerrilla, the subversion did not have any economical source, why? Because the rich people who could provide the money had already ran away, they had left, then the people who stayed were not rich but had a farm with some cattle, some workers and some money, so those things were split among the people who had left, then, people that stay and work hard, who have made money out of work...so they started to ask for money, and it was not a voluntary thing to do, but an obligation, we had to provide the money or the supplies they needed.

When the state finally decided to break in, great waves of economic destruction took place. The paramilitary, instead, are at the same time adversaries, allies, and parasites of the state; they are intent on inviting both state agencies and investment, and on guaranteeing a stable economic environment.

Second, the protection of property rights. The paramilitary insisted on the fact that in their territories property would be free from pressures coming from the guerrilla or social movements. The stability of property rights is not fully guaranteed – small tenants have been ransacked, landlords have been occasionally also victims of the arbitrariness of commanders – but instead it is a fact that the rural rich have been largely insulated from social pressures, and their financial and political support to the self-defence groups, plus the cost of the ‘errors’ times the probability that they happen, can be seen as the price they pay for such insulation.

Third, ‘liberty’. A characteristic of FARC’s social order is the high interest in the mores of the dwellers: how do they behave? Do they drink too much? Are they drug consumers? Are they workers or vagrants? The Puerto Boyacá paramilitary picked up on this theme, but relaxed the moral control.⁷⁴ Two or three crimes that are paradigmatic of ‘immorality’ (rape, for example) are punished with death, but in general they insist much less on moral improvement than the FARC, and are quite conscious of the difference.

All three themes are used to maintain the *internal* cohesion of the self-defence groups. The paramilitary allow people to get rich, or at least offer a salary, while the guerrilla does not;⁷⁵

⁷⁵ This is acknowledged explicitly by Carlos Castaño, in Castro, 1996)

they respect property; they do not separate their combatants from their families. A paramilitary commander talks about a deserter of the FARC in the following terms:

Of course he is thankful to us, he is with his wife, we told him he could bring his mother too. But when you are with the guerrilla you have to forget about them, your mother, brothers, everybody.

In this context, the democratic *profession de foi* of the paramilitary is not so extravagant as it may seem: “We will never tolerate military dictatorships, be them leftist or rightist, nor will we defend a state that strongly intervenes in social relations”.⁷⁶ It is here where the re-stating of the state by the paramilitary appears more clearly: they can indeed coexist with ‘democracy’ and elections; and they find decentralisation perhaps an ideal environment to thrive. As they express the functional divergence between policing and the territorial expansion of the antisubversive drive, they try to link their murderous form of policing with standard democratic institutions. In doing so, they perturb such institutions, and constantly re-enact themselves.

In conclusion, it is impossible to understand the Colombian paramilitary without taking into account that: a) they appeared at a moment when the Colombian state was waging two wars (against subversion and against drugs); and b) their main enemy was a guerrilla with weak social support but strong military apparatus and traditions, so the standard paramilitary strategy of taking the water from the fish allowed for paramilitary expansion, but not for the critical undermining of the FARC.⁷⁷ Both factors had the following consequences:

- a) the interaction between the State (and in general intra-systemic forces) and the paramilitary was ambiguous: cooperation, parasitism, and conflict between them coexisted;
- b) the war was long, and it had to be made politically and financially sustainable;
- c) this transformed the paramilitary in the direction of a ‘democratisation of violence’;
- d) this was democratic in the double sense that it could coexist with democratic institutions, and expressed a partial social change of guard (from rural rich to experts in lethal violence);
- e) this ‘democratisation’ à la Franchetti, like the Sicilian, is no less murderous than the old, hierarchical version of paramilitarism, and fundamentally transforms both the meaning of ‘state’ and ‘democracy’;
- f) the evolution from roving to stationary banditism has not taken place. What we are witnessing is bureaucratic entropy, territorial fragmentation, and functional divergence;
- g) despite all this, paramilitarism cannot be reduced to pure rent seeking.

Self defence groups are involved in something more than pure rent seeking, but rather a ‘sacred trilogy’ of regional progress, property protection and soft control; and something less than politics as we conventionally understand it. But beyond this the complex ways in which they constantly re-state the state show eloquently the limits of an analysis of war founded on the fiction that there is a Chinese wall between politics and economics.

⁷⁶ (Tercer Actor, p. 8)

⁷⁷ It was, however, quite harmful for the ELN, a guerrilla that insists much more than the FARC on social mobilisation and organisation.

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Annex 1

Social origins and antisubversive motivations of some of the early leaders of the self defences of Puerto Boyacá

| Commander's Features | Rank | Social origin | Anti subversive motivations |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| Gonzalo Pérez | He was the first commander of the self defence of Puerto Boyacá. Father of Henry Pérez. | Male nurse in the hospital of the town. He was also a cattle rancher. | He was the contact between the hospital and the FARC. He became the male nurse of the FARC. As a cattle rancher he was threatened and extorted by the FARC. |
| Henry Pérez | He replaced his father in the command of the self defence of Puerto Boyacá. | Cattle rancher of Puerto Boyacá. | Extorted by the FARC as his father |
| Oscar Echandia | Commander of the MAS in Magdalena Medio, while he was the military mayor of Puerto Boyacá and Puerto Berrio | Captain of the Army. | |
| 'Ariel Otero' | After Pérez's death he became number one in the self defence of the Magdalena Medio. | Lieutenant of the Army | |
| Nelson Lesmes | He was an executive of ACDEGAM | Owner of a poultry company and real state. He was also a small cattle rancher. | Extorted and threatened by the FARC |
| 'Don Chepe' | He was the founder and leader of the self defence groups in La Dorada. | Cattle rancher and farmer of La Dorada | Extorted by the FARC. The FARC tried to kill him three times. |

Annex 2

Today's commanders of the selfdefences of Magdalena Medio

| Commander | Social origin | Anti subversive motivations | Immediate Boss |
|---|---|--|----------------------|
| Víctor Triana (Alias 'Botalón') | Born in Puerto Boyacá. He was a farm worker and he joined the selfdefence as one of the many farm workers in the payroll of the cattle ranchers involved in the self defences | | |
| Ramón Isaza | Farmer. Born in Argelia, Antioquia. He arrived to Magdalena Medio in 1954. | | |
| Carlos Arenas | His familia was the owner of a small farm. He was born in Puerto Boyacá. | His family was extorted by the guerrilla. | 'Botalón' and 'Luis' |
| Luis | His family had a small farm. He was born in Puerto Boyacá. | His family bore the pressures of the guerrilla. | 'Botalón' |
| 'El Pájaro' | His family owned a farm. Born in Puerto Boyacá. | His family was affected by the pressure of the guerrilla. A cousin was kidnapped and despite paying ransom, she was never returned home by the FARC. | 'Botalón' and 'Luis' |
| Mc Gyver | Farm worker. He was born in Francisco, Antioquia. | His brother was a bus driver, and in this capacity made some works for the FARC. When he refused to continue doing it he was killed. | Ramón Isaza |
| David Velandia (Alias 'El Negro') | Born in the urban area of La Dorada. After finishing his high school and being unemployed he decided to join the self defence. | | Memo |
| 'El Gurre' | Farmer, born in La Dorada. He worked for the narcotrafficker Rodríguez Gacha. | | Ramón Isaza |
| 'Memo' | Before he entered the self defence neither his family nor him owned any properties. He belonged to the traffic police in La Dorada and was dismissed accused of corruption. He was unemployed for a couple of years before entering the self defence. | | 'El Gurre' |

Annex 3

Main figures of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, the national paramilitary organization, in the early 1990s

| | Fidel Castaño | Carlos Castaño | Salvatore Mancuso | Iván Roberto Duque (Ernesto Baez) |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Rank | Founder of the ACCU (Self defences of Córdoba and Urabá) | Founder and commander of the AUC | The most important man of the AUC after Carlos Castaño, in charge of the military logistics. | He had strong links with the self defences of Puerto Boyacá and he was the inspiration for the making up of the AUC. He was never involved in the military operations, he was an ideologue, disciple of Pablo Guarín, the Liberal and paramilitary leader of Puerto Boyacá in the early 80s. |
| Social origin and criminal networks | Son of a cattle breeder of Córdoba. Initially held strong links with the Medellín Cartel. After, however, he allied with members of security agencies of the state, entrepreneurs and Cali narcotraffickers to fight against Pablo Escobar. | Son of a cattle breeder. He and his brother (Fidel) held strong links with the Medellín Cartel. Then he was active in the anti-Escobar organization created by his brother. He and his brother were involved in other illegal activities | Comes from a rich immigrant Italian family. His family colonized territories in the department of Córdoba. He grew cotton, rice and he was a huge cattle rancher. He acted as the link between the organization and the notables of Córdoba and Urabá | Lawyer of the Universidad de Caldas. |
| Anti subversive motivations | His father was kidnapped and assassinated by the FARC | His father was kidnapped and assassinated by the FARC | He was extorted by the FARC, which also tried to kidnap him. . He was kidnapped by the EPL. | Aversion to the left |
| Links with the Puerto Boyacá experience | He participated in the training courses offered in the Puerto Boyacá schools. He cooperated with the self defence groups of Puerto Boyacá to organize the first massacres in Urabá. | He had relations with the self defences of Puerto Boyacá, and he participated in the training courses offered in their schools. He cooperated with the self defences of Puerto Boyacá to organize the first massacres in Urabá. | He created a small self defence group when the law permitted it. His group supported the army operations. | Ideologue of the self defences of Puerto Boyacá |

Source: Aranguren (2001)

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